

BOOK REVIEW

Heidi R. Lewis. *Make Rappers Rap Again: Interrogating the Mumble Rap "Crisis"*

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Reviewed by Lachlan Howells

Despite mumble rap's popularity and cultural impact, the term has a history of being used pejoratively to attack a modern class of rappers whose aesthetic, cultural references, and musical sensibilities conflict with certain rooted understandings of what hip hop is, and should be. Notably, many of these criticisms come from respected hip hop figures who attack mumble rappers on the grounds that they are detached from hip hop's history and culture, and that their music lacks certain elements understood to be essential to the genre. In *Make Rappers Rap Again: Interrogating the Mumble Rap "Crisis"*, Heidi R. Lewis offers a timely analysis of the discourse that has surrounded the term 'mumble rap' since it came into popularity in the early 2010s, considering the claims made against mumble rappers in terms of the broader history of hip hop and African American music.

Make Rappers Rap Again: Interrogating the Mumble Rap "Crisis", is part of an Oxford University Press book series titled *Theorizing African American Music* (TAAM) which foregrounds the work of BIPOC scholars, pulling the discussion of 'African American musical genres away from whiteness... moving beyond the narrow confines of what has, historically, constituted music theory in the United States' (p. xi). In their contribution to this series, Lewis uses discourse analysis, in combination with autoethnography, to take a critical approach to the mumble rap sound, while also explaining the ways in which the subgenre has been subjugated due to the dominant masculine norms it challenges.

The book's introduction titled 'Notes to Self and to You the Reader' invites the reader into Lewis's lived experience, documenting a series of notes that chronicle the rise of mumble rap, the development of Lewis's thoughts on the subgenre, and the media environment surrounding it. The inclusion of images detailing popular online meme formats provide further insight into the effect online modes of communication have had in boosting certain perceptions of the

subgenre and the artists associated with it—something revisited in subsequent chapters. While providing a useful, condensed summary of several key developments in and around mumble rap, this introduction also communicates Lewis's excitement and appreciation for the subgenre, offering a useful starting point for readers who may not already consider themselves fans.

Chapter 1 examines the criticisms made against mumble rap which frequently pit earlier generations of hip hop artists against mumble rappers, framing the latter as weird, ignorant, unintelligent, and non-serious. Lewis addresses these criticisms, offering several compelling examples that demonstrate the strains of influence present in mumble rap that date back to previous eras of hip hop. At the same time, Lewis is careful not place too much weight on criticisms that enforce standards as part of upholding certain notions of hip hop purity. While dispelling the idea that mumble rappers are ahistorical presentists, with no knowledge or commitment to the creative currents of previous hip hop artists, Lewis simultaneously advocates for 'a more generative and collaborative approach to understanding and even honoring our distinct and shared experiences with Hip Hop' (p. 44). Such an approach both honours hip hop's past while appreciating mumble rap in terms that are not entirely defined by what came before it.

Lewis demonstrates this approach in Chapter 2, countering criticisms levelled against mumble rap based on a perceived lack of lyricism while demonstrating what is new, novel, and exciting in the creative sensibilities of mumble rappers. Beginning with a rebuttal of the accusation mumble rappers are lacking in lyrical ability, several examples are used to demonstrate that, by the standards of those criticising mumble rap, it simply is not true. However, Lewis is willing to concede that lyricism, as defined in earlier eras of hip hop, can take a less central role in mumble rap, which may emphasise different musical elements associated with the subgenre. Lewis demonstrates this by providing an analysis of several different rap verses from different mumble rappers, illustrating the techniques employed, including the creative use of rhythmic flow, enjambment, and melodic sing-rapping (to name a few), in conjunction with complex beats punctuated with rhyme stresses. As Lewis writes, '...sometimes less is more, and sometimes less isn't even less' (p. 65).

Chapter 3 explores the Southern origins of Mumble Rap in the United States, examining hip hop's typical association with the denser urban centres of the North and the pejorative Southern stereotypes that influence the way people perceive and value Southern hip hop. Drawing on stereotypes characterising the South as less progressive and more backward politically than the North, Southern rap music has often been characterised as simple, unintelligent and slow, with examples given of online memes that draw ableist and racist associations to subjugate mumble rappers. In resisting this characterisation of Southern hip hop, Lewis surveys the 'Southernness of Mumble Rap' across six regions in the South— Atlanta, Virginia, South Florida, the Midsouth, Louisiana, and Houston (p. 88). Returning to earlier criticisms, namely that mumble rappers are disconnected from their hip hop roots, Lewis is able to effectively demonstrate the ways mumble rap 'is both conversant and congruent with a rich and *critical* Southern Hip Hop History...', highlighting the effect superficial and elitist engagement with Southern rappers can have in subjugating, even erasing, the South's identity, place, and influence in hip hop (p. 86).

Lewis moves on to discussing the contours of masculinity within mumble rap in Chapter

4, examining criticisms made against mumble rappers on the grounds that they do not uphold notions of masculinity considered authentic in hip hop. In one example, Lewis analyses the critique that mumble rap portrays a weakness to drug addiction in contrast to a certain idealised rapper of previous eras rapping from the perspective of the dealer, not the addict. Again, Lewis disproves this understanding on the basis that rappers from previous eras of hip hop have also dealt with this subject matter, from a similar perspective, but again holds space for what is novel and different in mumble rap. Here, Lewis identifies a level of comfort with vulnerability within Mumble Rap, which ‘offers a more robust and humane landscape of Hip Hop ontologies, especially for young Black men, which is understandably scary and admittedly imperfect but absolutely necessary’ (p. 142). However, Lewis goes on to acknowledge that mumble rappers can sometimes be extremely problematic, giving examples of homophobic behaviour and abuse committed against women by popular mumble rappers. This topic is not discussed in detail, but it is revisited in the book’s conclusion, where Lewis states ‘[a]s long as sexism, misogyny, and other forms of subjugation and oppression are prevalent in our worlds, they’ll likely be prevalent in Hip Hop’ (p. 169). While I agree with this and appreciate Chapter 4’s focus is on defending mumble rap against criticisms that enforce rigid gender norms, Lewis lays the groundwork for a deeper analysis of the contours of masculinity in mumble rap than the one given—perhaps, this is a topic for another project.

Chapter 5 centres on an interview with DJ Drama, an influential and award-winning DJ, producer, and record label executive with an established history of supporting Southern hip hop artists, including mumble rappers. The chapter begins with a brief summary of the events that led to Lewis meeting DJ Drama, followed by a conversational interview discussing their perspectives on why mumble rap can be so divisive in the hip hop community, the benefits of being open to new subgenres of hip hop, and the importance of supporting and nurturing current and future generations of hip hop artists. While less analytical than previous chapters, the interview highlights how time, place, and life events influence the connections people form with music and artists, with Lewis and DJ Drama comparing their experiences growing up in the 1990s, reflecting on earlier and recent eras of hip hop. In doing so, Lewis and DJ Drama acknowledge the potential for nostalgia to romanticise the past at the expense of the present, while both expressing a love for the current era of hip hop, and an excitement for what is to come.

Overall, Lewis provides a compelling argument for mumble rap’s rightful place within hip hop, successfully countering several popular arguments aimed at diminishing—or subjugating—both the music and the artists involved. Beyond this, the book offers a theoretical justification for mumble rap’s musicality. While defending it on these terms is not necessary to justify mumble rap’s artistic value and cultural significance, by providing detailed descriptions of mumble rappers’ technical virtuosity, this book offers a compelling rebuttal to any claims that mumble rappers are lacking in musical ability or are simply derivative. Further, by drawing on their personal relationship and history with hip hop, and music more broadly, Lewis illustrates the complex relationships fans and artists form with musical genres and subgenres, and the risks of uncritically weaponising particular recollections of history against perceived difference (p. 46). While there are themes touched upon in this book that could have been explored in greater detail (in particular, the influence of social media platforms in driving certain elements of the mumble rap discourse, and mumble rap’s connection with cloud rap and

the influence of European rappers), Lewis nevertheless puts forward a compelling argument for the legitimisation of mumble rap as a hip hop subgenre.

About the Author

Lachlan Howells is a writer and researcher from Perth, Western Australia. He holds degrees in sociology and finance from Curtin University, where he completed a PhD researching the live performances, and forms of viewership, of videogame streamers on the Twitch platform. More recently, Lachlan has conducted research into online participatory politics and extremism, investigating how young people counter and resist far right and extremist narratives.